DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 263 554 CS 209 343

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TITLE The Basic Writer as Reluctant Oralist.
PUB DATE 23 Mar 85
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (36th, Minneapolis, MN, March 21-23, 1985).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cognitive Ability; Cognitive Processes; Cognitive Style; Learning Strategies; Low Achievement; Minority Groups; *Nonstandard Dialects; *Oral Language; Standard Spoken Usage; Verbal Communication; Writing Difficulties; Writing Processes; *Writing Skills; *Written Language

ABSTRACT

By identifying speculations concerning cognitive abilities and cognition's relation to culture, this paper outlines some of the work surrounding basic writers and speaking-writing relationships. Beginning with a discussion of the differences between speaking and writing popularized by Mina Shaughnessy, the paper goes on to examine studies that attempt to determine the extent to which speaking interferes with effective writing. The paper explores two hypotheses: (1) the cognitive disadvantage theory, which concludes that since basic writers have difficulty with the kinds of analyses, syntheses, abstractions, and "decentering" needed for college work, they must be at a lesser developmental stage than their more able peers; and (2) the oral cultural hypothesis advocated by Thomas Farrell, which indicates that American blacks are unable to reach the highest levels in Piaget's cognitive scheme because their language relies on narrative and coordinate, rather than logical and subordinate, syntactic structures. The paper recommends comparing the processes of the skilled and less skilled writers, rather than comparing dialects, races, or ethnic minorities with the supposed majority. It concludes that though we do students a disservice by advising that they write like they talk, we also do a disservice by insisting on radical difference. (EL)

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication Minneapolis, MN, 23 March 1985

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The Basic Writer as Reluctant Oralist

by Victor Villanueva

About thirteen years ago William Labov popularized his study on inner-city kids by publishing a part of a chapter in the Atlantic Monthly. He titled the article "Academic Ignorance and Black Intelligence." Some thirteen years later and thirteen years worth of speculation, discussion, and research later and basic writing remains in what Robert Connors has recently described as a "benighted theory vacuum." Today I'll briefly outline some of the work surrounding basic writers and speaking-writing relationships. Those who have tried to shed some light on basic writers' problems have concentrated, for the most part, on two particular areas: the study of error and the speaking-writing relationship. Closely related to the speaking-writing relationship as it concerns basic writers have been speculations concerning cognitive abilities and cognition's relation to culture.

Looking to differences between speaking and writing became popularized by Mina Shaughnessy, of course. She found that her basic writers' errors seemed "rooted in the real differences between spoken and written sentences." This seemed so reasonable, and her lucid sincerity in Errors and Expectations is so persuasive that her speculations have become givens, for most. But Shaughnessy was evidently unaware of Geneva Smitherman's dissertation, from back in 1969. She studied fourteen black, middle-school kids from Detroit and found that (1) their writing was on the whole more formal than their speech; (2) their writing was more precise than their speech; (3) their writing was not much different than Standard American English.

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Right after Shaughnessy's book several studies tried to determine the extent to which speaking interfered with effective writing. Patrick Groff found such interference in the writing of second-grade black children, but he also found that by the middle grades the signs of interference had gone. This not only substantiated Smitherman, but it jibed with research on children's writing acquisition.

Developmentalists have found that children in general rely heavily on speech at earlier stages but learn to make appropriate distinctions between speech and writing later on.

Cayer and Sacks studied eight basic writers at a New York City Community College in order to determine the extent of these writer's reliance on oral forms. Not surprisingly, they found some. They figured writing would contain longer T-units (a T-unit being an independent clause with all its subordinate clauses). They also figured on more adjectives and adverbs per T-unit in writing. Their basic writers' oral exercises and their written exercises showed these very differences. Cayer and Sacks also assumed that writing would have fewer "I guesses" or "I feels" than speaking. The basic writers did use fewer in writing. Cayer and Sacks also thought that writing would call for an extended elaboration on the subjects of the discourse. The basic writers did not elaborate.

But there is a methodological or rhetorical problem here. We're not told who the students were to regard as audiences for their written task. For the oral task the student were broken up into four dyads, each pair consisting of students of the same sex and race. If they conceived of themselves as still writing to that same partner then a whole lot of context was likely shared; in

which case, there would have been no need to elaborate further on the subject.

In a recent review of research which studied the possibility of a dialect's interference in writing, Patrick Hartwell concluded that "arguments offered to support assumption [of a dialect interference] are either logically insufficient, questionable in their theoretical basis, or so general as to be meaningless."

In my own research on the influence of sound on written discourse I put aside questions of dialect interference and look to oral presence, utilization, and interaction. Instead of asking if basic writers rely on features of orality I ask how their reliance compares with that of traditional first-year comp students.

Now, the details of my study are better left to print than to speech. A comparison of oral transcripts to written texts and their analysis would be cumbersome, tiring, and not very helpful in a brief talk. So I'll remain at this general level, supplying tidbits here and there.

Let's back up to Cayer and Sacks' suggestion about subject-elaboration. Here's what can happen when a hard-and fast distinction between speaking and writing is drawn. This is a second-draft. The instructor on the first had said something like "tell me more. I can't stop you to give me more details, as I could if we were talking." The student writes:

> Riding the metro bus takes a lot time.
> The 305 bus takes about 35 minutes from
> my home to school, and 30 minutes from school
> to home. The 307 bus takes one hour from home

to work and 45 minutes from work to my home. Taking the bus from home to school takes about 5 minutes more than school to home, because in the morning there would be lots of people to pick up on every other bus stop and also many people would be driving along Roosevelt Way, along the 305 bus routes toward school, causing traffic jams.

Many, many more fine details later we get to his point:

> Driving my car to school and to work gave me about 3 to 4 hours extra to work and study my homework from school.

When one of the members in his peer-evaluation group asked him why he had gone on so, he said he figured his main reader, the teacher, wouldn't be familiar with the ins and outs of commuting by bus. His problem wasn't really a speaking-writing problem. It was experiential. Middle-class college teachers were outside his realm of experience. He didn't know how much detail was necessary.

Yet it's on an assumption of speech interference that we come to some phenomenal hypotheses.

Take the cognitive disadvantage theory. This grows out of the research of the likes of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky. It comes to the conclusion that since the basic writer has difficulty with the kinds of analyses, syntheses,

abstractions, and "decentering" needed for college work, the basic writer must be at a lesser developmental stage than her more able peers. Decentering and abstracting, the ability to form scientific concepts, Vygotsky and others have suggested, involve complex psychological processes; and such complex processes are essential to written discourse.

I've got problems with this line of reasoning. Mike Rose argues that such judgments of basic writers are "unwarranted extrapolations from a misuse (or overuse) of the developmental psychologist's diagnostic instruments." He presents a good, tight argument on how one needs appropriate measures to determine such things as developmental stages. I agree with Rose wholeheartedly, yet I have read no account of a theorist who uses any kind of diagnostic instruments. He uses teacher's intuition. Test your intuition.

Here's a couple of closing paragraphs to students' assignments (the particulars aren't important):

> Life isn't a self-centered event. To full fill each moment I share experiences with friends and family, and enhance each day with love. Life isn't just there, but it's something individuals create.

Compare that with this:

> The time that I spent with those children in the reading program will be a constant reminder that the jobs that seem impossible and hard to achieve can actually be possible

and attainable.

Can you tell which is the basic writer's paragraph and which the traditional?

Maybe the cognitive-deficit theory is right after all--just that it hasn't been sufficiently generalized. Robert Bergstrom notes that whereas Piaget's earlier studies indicated formal operational reasoning in young folks around the age of fourteen, recent research places American college students at a transitional stage. At the transitional stage formal patterns can predominate for a while and concrete patterns can take over for other periods of time. "Piaget and Inhelder," Bergstrom tells us, "make a special point of noting that young people in transition from the concrete operational stage to the formal stage tend to be quite egocentric, to assume that the new world opening to their eyes is the world."

Bergstrom is not telling of basic writers but of students in general who enroll in his first-year literature classes.

As one of the students in my study wrote:

> This letter was written as personal revenge,
> which wasn't too grown up but I never
> claimed to act as a full-fledged adult.

This was not a Basic Writing Student.

Vygotsky declares that abstracting and being able to apply those abstractions to new concrete situations, the ability to flow from particular to general and from that to a new particular, the stage of scientific concepts or formal operations, is "usually mastered only toward the end of the adolescent period." Vygotsky doesn't say when this period comes about, but traditionally

late adolescense is around the age of eighteen. We might speak of our first-year students as young adults, but in so doing we're making a socio-cultural distinction not a cognitive-developmental one.

Well, as long as we're making distinctions between cognitive development and socio-cultural demands we might as well mention the oral-culture hypothesis--the "being retarded isn't your fault" school of thought. According to Thomas Farrell, the most outspoken proponent of the oral-culture hypothesis, black ghetto children reside in a residual oral culture. Their language relies on narrative and coordinate rather than logical and subordinate syntactic structures. And their language lacks a full realization of the copulative to be. Literate thought, you see, requires that full realization of to be. Just like preliterate black Africans (no distinction among African cultures)--just like illiterate black Africans, American blacks are unable to reach the highest two levels in Piaget's cognitive scheme.

As you might guess Farrell has been under pretty strong and steady attack for this argument. To his idea of a dialect interference, Hartwell's research summary has been cited. Goodman and Goodman's reading research, which finds no correlation between spoken dialect and normal reading acquisition has also been cited. As one would expect, Labov's work with black and Puerto Rican youths has also been a strong witness against Farrell.

There is also the work of A.P. Luria and Scribner and Cole. Scribner and Cole's work with the Vai of Liberia revealed a people who had various forms of literacy. But despite their multiple literacy, Scribner and Cole noted no great cognitive change in the society. Luria's work (with Vygotsky) in Asia Minor, shortly after the Russian Revolution, describes peasants who had taken

part in literacy courses and had undergone the kind of radical cognitive growth that Farrell predicts for all those who learn how to talk good and write better. So the question arises: Why had the Russians changed and not the Liberians? Luria provides a likely explanation. His peasants believe that through literacy they could take part in the major changes they believe underfoot. The Vai held no such belief. Change, in Luria's terms, occurs only after the creation of new motives. The problem with black ghetto children is more likely one of expectation as well as experience. Learning to speak Standard American English will not necessarily lead to an understanding of Edited American English and will not likely raise cognitive levels, if they do in fact need raising.

The one aspect of Farrell's argument which I haven't yet seen countered is the assumption he long ago stated in the Journal of Basic Writing; that is, that "individuals recapitulate to some extent the history of the race." The phylogenesis he refers to is the move from orality to literacy. In this he is following Walter Ong, who has gotten much the same press as Farrell. And Ong is following Eric Havelock. For Havelock the alphabet made expository prose possible and this new literacy gave birth to a new cognitive domain. But Chomsky and Halle's work shows that English does not contain the hard-and-fast letter-to-sound correlation which Havelock finds important. And Sandra Stotsky pointed out at last year's CCCC's meeting that Havelock's contention "has not been accepted by most scholars, who point to, among other things, the existence of Socrates, an oral philosopher, and other pre-Socratic philosophers as counter-evidence." Yet for Farrell, Ong, and others this is the path of "the race."

This ethnocentrism is perhaps the greatest problem still facing scholarship and research on basic writers. We just love our taxonomies. With few exceptions, even those who are deeply troubled by the kinds of deficit theories I've been speaking of still tend to associate the basic writer with the black writer. Even terms like Hispanic, Asian, or Native American don't do justice to the kind of diversity found in this country or in the basic writing classroom. In my research I sat in on a basic writing class and a traditional first-year comp class. The basic writing class had no black students enrolled. The traditional had three blacks: a struggling football player we'd be quick to call a basic writer; a young woman whose every paper somehow settled on the trials of love; and a rather successful woman, born and raised among the middle-class. Among the others in the basic class, the Native American came from a Canadian tribe, the Chicana and the Asian, as it turned out, both came from a blend of Philipina, Spaniard, and Mexican, though each looked and spoke quite differently from the other. The "white" student was raised by her Chicana mother. The traditional class had not only the three black students but an Iranian, a Japanese-American who knew no Japanese, and a Jewish woman who was raised alongside her black sister. We just can't be so facile with our labels. Rather than begin by comparing one spoken dialect with another or one race with another or one group of ethnic minorities with the supposed majority, we would do better to begin by comparing the processes of the skilled and the less skilled and let the cultural, racial, or dialectal correlates emerge if they exist.

My research suggests that though we do students a disservice by advising that they write like they talk we also do a disservice by insisting on radical

difference. The major difference I have found in basic and traditional writers at the University of Washington, as it relates to the speaking-writing relationship, is that the traditional student has developed intuitions she trusts, not so the basic writer.

In the basic writing class I observed, the instructor found that students so often made connections by providing detail via dialogue that he taught them the conventions of dialogue. The students were in sudden control, but not comfortable with it.

Here's an excerpt from a basic writer's paper on a day of hunting:

> We stopped at a small meadow overlooking the bay far below. As I sat there . . . my friend shared his thoughts about deer hunting: "The department of Fish and Game has made a lot of rules to protect the deer. It used to be that a man could come out here and get as many as he wanted. Now it isn't easy to find them. Many times I have made ten trips before I was able to get one. Hunting can be quite expensive, but the meat is so delicious that it is worth it. These creatures are so cagey that I have seen them crawling on their knees to get away from me. Anyway, we'd better get started. Maybe we'll get lucky on the way down."

The teacher, who happened to be sitting in on this writer's group that day, mentioned liking the dialogue. The student fidgets:

> Well, I knew what I was thinking. And then when Amo looked at me. We both knew what we were thinking without ever saying. See, that's how close we are . . . See, I didn't wanna lie in the paper. 'Cause the feelings I expressed in the paper were the feelings we were having all along . . .

He had done a marvelous job, an "A" paper by anyone's standards. But in turning to talk written down in order to express a shared feeling with his brother Amo he thought he had broken some moral code. When one of the traditional students was asked to remove cliches from an assignment the writer objected: "this is a letter to a friend, not an English paper. Maybe putting things this way has a special significance. I wouldn't be watching to eliminate cliches and junk in a real letter to friend."

This argument simply wouldn't have occurred to the basic writing student.

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